



Public Health Assessment Activities

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

- Throughout the United States there are approximately 40,000 locations with uncontrolled hazardous (chemical) wastes that could cause people harm. People can be exposed to dangerous or toxic chemicals from these sites through breathing, drinking water, touching soil, or eating foods. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) determines whether this exposure occurs and could cause illness or disease.
- The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) is required by law to conduct a public health assessment at each site on the EPA National Priorities List. The aim of these evaluations is to find out if people are, have been, or could be, exposed to hazardous substances. ATSDR determines whether the exposure is harmful and should be stopped or reduced.

WHAT HAS ATSDR ACCOMPLISHED?

Each year, ATSDR conducts more than 1,000 public health assessment activities. As many as 25% of these assessments show that a public health hazard exists. For an urgent health threat, ATSDR can issue a public health advisory to warn people of the danger. ATSDR health assessments can also recommend further action such as health education, health studies, disease surveillance, registries, and research on specific hazardous substances.

As a first step, ATSDR scientists review chemical data from samples of soil, water, air, or food to find out where the contamination is, how much is there, and how people might come into contact with it. If the environmental data show that people could be, or already have been exposed, ATSDR scientists assess whether harmful effects might occur. The evaluation focuses on the health impact for the community as a whole, rather than on individual risk. For past and future exposures, ATSDR can use environmental sampling information combined with computer models to estimate the exposure levels for contaminants.

Public health professionals and environmental risk managers at the federal, state and local level use ATSDR assessments to determine if intervention is needed to minimize or eliminate exposures. Follow-up tracking shows that most ATSDR public health recommendations are followed.

Equally important, ATSDR provides community members with clear information about the possible health effects of past, current, or future contact with site chemicals. Through a petition process and community involvement efforts, ATSDR also handles community concerns about chemical waste sites and related health issues. Based on customer survey responses soliciting feedback on public health assessment documents, 78% of community respondents have indicated that ATSDR addressed their health concerns.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

ATSDR continues to develop new tools for assessing exposure and its possible health effects to make the most substantial difference in people's health and well being. ATSDR also continues to develop its state cooperative agreement program to further build and support public health partners nationwide as they address issues related to human exposure to hazardous substances.

For information on this and other CDC and ATSDR programs, visit www.cdc.gov/programs.

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